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ABSTRACT

The United States still has citizens, but it is said that their commitment to the political community is more tenuous than it has ever been. Civic virtue and even civility are in decline, along with moral and political qualities that make a good citizen. U.S. people between the ages of 18 and 25 are conspicuously lacking in the attributes of good citizenship. They are less likely to vote than either their older counterparts or young people of past decades. They are not as interested in political discussion and public issues as past generations were at the same point in their lives. Given this evidence of decline, many contend that, if blame is to be laid anywhere, it must be at the doorsteps of the nation's schools and universities. They have failed, critics allege, to fulfill their civic mission and to prepare their students to be informed and effective citizens. This paper proposes that to test the truth or falsity of the critics' allegations three questions should be considered: (1) what is now known about the status of civic education in the nation's schools?; (2) what does research say about civic education practices and programs that foster the knowledge, skills, and civic dispositions essential for all citizens of a constitutional democracy?; and (3) how can civic education be improved and why is it imperative to do so? The address considers and explores each question. (Contains 18 notes.) (BT)

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ED 476 345

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROMOTING CIVIC EDUCATION

by Margaret Branson, Associate Director, Center for Civic Education

An Address to the 2nd Annual Scholars Conference
Sponsored by the Center for Civic Education
Pasadena, California
January 31, 2003

Who among us as teachers and scholars has not, at times, longed for "the good old days" when students were truly diligent pursuers of knowledge and schools were noted for their rigor?

My own sense of longing was heightened the other day when I read an account of education in the late 1760s at the College of New Jersey (later to be renamed Princeton University). At the time when James Madison, aged 16, entered as a first year student, the College guaranteed "free and equal liberty and the advantage of education to any Person of any religious denomination whatsoever." It encouraged open debate and assigned textbooks such as Isaac Watt's classic *Logick: or the Right Use of Reason in the Enquiry After Truth*.

Colleges then didn't coddle students. Princeton retained its right to "direct the conduct and studies of the youth and to restrain them from such liberties and indulgences as would tend to corrupt their morals or alienate their minds from steady application." And steady application was *de rigueur*.

At five o'clock each morning, a bell rang to awaken students. They went to morning prayer and then studied for an hour—all before breakfast. Studies continued throughout the day punctuated by group meals which were a requirement. Professors and even the College president were obliged to eat with the students to insure that their minds were nourished along with their bodies.

By nine o'clock, students were consigned to their own rooms for further study or to sleep. Some dedicated students, such as James Madison, opted for more time with the books. In fact, Madison slept no more than four or five hours per night while at Princeton.

Lest we take too seriously what at first glace may appear to academics as more illustrious times in education, we should recall Benjamin Franklin's truism: "The Golden Age *Never* Was the Present Age." (Poor Richard's Almanac).

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In fact, as Michael Walzer reminds us, "Decline and fall is the most common perception, even among intellectuals."[1]

At about the same time that Madison was attending Princeton, Rousseau was lamenting "We have physicists, geometers, chemists, poets, musicians, and painters; we no longer have citizens."[2]

Here in he United States we still do have citizens, but it is said of them that their commitment to the political community is more tenuous than it ever has been. Civic virtue and even civility are in decline, along with moral and political qualities that make a good citizen. Americans between the ages of 18 and 25 are conspicuously lacking in the attributes of good citizenship. They are less likely to vote than either their older counterparts or young people of past decades. They are not as interested in political discussion and public issues as past generations were at the same point in their lives.

Given this evidence of decline, many contend that, if blame is to be laid anywhere, it must be at the doorsteps of the nation's schools and universities. They have failed, critics allege, to fulfill their civic mission and to prepare their students to be informed and effective citizens.

This morning I propose that we test the truth or falsity of the critics' allegations by considering three questions:

1. What do we now know about the status of civic education in the nation's schools?
2. What does research tell us about civic education practices and programs that foster the knowledge, skills, and civic dispositions essential for all citizens of a constitutional democracy?
3. How can we go about improving civic education and why is it imperative that we do so?

What We Know About the Current Status of Civic Education

One of the most important things that we know about civic education is that Americans profess it to be an essential—if not *the* essential—purpose of education. Over the course of 33 years of Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup polling, Americans have overwhelmingly concurred that "educating young people for responsible citizenship" should be the primary goal of our schools. Their conviction that the school's central mission is educating young people for citizenship has not wavered over time, and it

obtains whether or not respondents have children in school or whether or not their children are in public or private school.

It is also important to note, that the need of civic education is not only recognized by the elder generations of Americans. In a 2002 survey, young people supported mandatory civics classes in middle and high schools by very large margins.

It is a paradox that at the same time that Americans of all ages acknowledge the primacy of civic education, it is being given less and less attention in our schools.

Time does not permit citing of the abundant evidence of the current neglect of education for citizenship. But let me at least draw your attention to a few salient facts.

- There is a marked trend away from civics and social studies in the elementary grades. Between 1988 and 1998 (the time period that elapsed between administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress in Civics or NAEP), the proportion of fourth grade students who reported daily classes in social studies dropped from 49 percent to 39 percent. That steep decline means that currently only slightly more than one-third of America's elementary school children are regularly engaged in what is supposed to be the primary focus of the schools: preparing young people to be informed, effective, and responsible citizens.
- Although the percentage of students enrolled in at least one high school government course has remained fairly constant since the late 1920s, most formal education today consists of a single course, usually required in the twelfth grade. That is both too little and too late. What is even more disturbing is that those students who drop out of high school before the senior year, and who perhaps are most in need of citizenship education are ill-equipped to assert their rights or to assume their obligations.[3]

Another paradox is that while young people today are more likely to sign up as a volunteer than to show up at the voting booth, their experience as volunteers does not translate into broader political participation. A survey of young Americans aged 15 to 25 conducted in early 2002 revealed that half (49%) deemed volunteering for community activities as most important versus just 12% who deemed participating in politics and government as consequential.[4]

While compassion for one's fellow human beings coupled with the desire to serve the less fortunate is commendable, volunteering for community service is no substitute for civic education. A number of astute political observers have made that point. Michael Delli Carpini at the Pew Charitable Trusts says, "My worry is that as good as a lot of service learning work is, that it does not encourage political involvement and policy involvement, but it may, in fact, even discourage it."[5]

Delli Carpini does not agree with the portrayal of young Americans as apathetic. On the contrary, he says, "They are very much concerned about public life and contributing to it. But they believe politics is not the most effective way for them to do it. They see government as ineffective and they see volunteerism as the most tangible, immediate way in which to see the effects of the work that they do."[6]

Other political scientists concur with Delli Carpini. They fault schools that offer or require volunteering for failure to couple community experiences with appropriate curriculum which addresses the larger policy issues involved in problems of the homeless, the environment, or inadequate education. Failure of school courses to attend to policy issues may even undermine the very goals of volunteer programs. No one is disputing that getting students outside their classrooms to see worlds they might never encounter and to see policy-making bodies in action are valuable components of civic education. Nonetheless, those firsthand experiences, if they are to be meaningful, must be preceded by appropriate instruction. Those experiences also must be accompanied by opportunities for reflection and consideration of how citizen participation in political processes can effect policy changes that can ameliorate community problems.

Now let's turn to what research tells us about two major deficiencies in current courses in civics and government. The first deficiency—and it is a very serious one—is the lack of understanding at a sufficiently deep level of the fundamental principles and major tenets of democracy and constitutionalism. Such knowledge and understanding is foundational, because it is the precursor to a citizen's reasoned and voluntary commitment to democratic norms, procedures, and outcomes. A citizen who understands the essential tenets of democracy is more likely to recognize that he has a shared interest, a collective interest that may sometimes contradict or override his own individual preferences. That citizen also is more committed to procedural fairness and he exhibits a

willingness to allow others—including those with whom he most strongly disagrees—to express and pursue their own interests. Some scholars claim that knowledge of the values and principles of democracy may be the most significant component of education for democratic citizenship, because when democratic norms are well understood they may have a kind of "grip on the mind" that makes them operate at a deeply internalized if not unconscious level.[7]

That all citizens need to understand the basic values and principles of a democracy is a well-accepted premise. As a matter of fact, all 28 countries participating in the IEA Civic Education Study[8] agreed on that point. The results of the study, however, reveal that this objective is far from being realized. In fact, American students ranked tenth among the 28 countries in their understanding of democracy.

Follow up studies involving interviews with young people in the United States also suggest that their understanding of democratic principles is fairly thin. Twelfth-grade students could easily espouse the "slogans of democracy," but when probed were unlikely to demonstrate any depth of understanding of these concepts. Similarly, interviews with children in the fifth grade, and then again when they were in the eighth grade, suggested that their understanding of democracy did not increase and that students were unable to articulate the relationships among democratic concepts.[9] (Avery, 2002:3).

A second deficiency to which we need to be attentive is American students' limited knowledge of international and transnational affairs. Study after study has documented the inadequate preparation of students to live in this rapidly changing and increasingly interdependent world.

For example, the IEA Study found that "Content related to national history and human citizens' rights tops the agenda in almost all countries.... Human rights and the environment are topics of importance. But the fairly low profile of international concerns may worry those who see civic education as a prime area of instruction that should prepare students for life in a globalized world."[10] (Torney-Purta, 2001:172).

More evidence comes from a recent survey of how secondary school textbooks treat the United Nations and international law. It concluded:

> In too many classroom, teachers and students debate complex global issues and conflicts with extremely limited direct knowledge and experience. World peace and security are discussed with the vocabulary

> and in the spirit of a Hallmark get-well card. Naiveté and wishful thinking—a deep aversion to looking at the harsh realities of a discordant world and the enemies of liberal democracy—are the rule. Issues that involve the welfare of all humanity, including those incumbent on specialized agencies and elements of the U.N. system, remain shielded from view.[11]

A just published, comparative study of civic literacy by Henry Milner of Tufts University also emphasizes the deficit in knowledge of international affairs. Milner defines civic literacy as "the knowledge and ability capacity of citizens to make sense of their political world." At the present time, there is no standardized test which measures the extent to which people over 16 years of age in each country possess the kind of literacy needed to be effective citizens in today's world. Nonetheless, given the assessment instruments now available, Milner has concluded:

> Overall, the impression is that people in (Northern) Continental European countries are more politically informed than people in the Atlantic English-speaking countries; the Americans are the least informed—at least concerning knowledge of international politics.[12]

Unfortunately, Milner's observations are confirmed by the IEA Study. Americans ranked last among the 28 countries in that survey in their interest in and attentiveness to international news. That finding should be of concern to us, because the other studies have shown that reading and watching the news in the media were positively related to political interest, political efficacy, and the willingness to engage in political actions.[13]

One of the challenges civic educators face is how to help not only the young but adult citizens as well develop a more realistic understanding of today's world and why the manner in which complex and manifold global problems are addressed affects them. It is beyond the scope of this presentation to discuss what adjustments need to be made in the school's curriculum. But it would seem a minimal understanding of the world in which they live requires citizens to be familiar with some basic concepts such as the nation-state, the international community, the world market, international law, human rights, and international norms. Citizens also ought to be acquainted with major compacts and conventions and with subnational and transnational governmental and nongovernmental organizations that affect their lives.

What Does Research Tell Us About Civic Education Programs and Practices That Are Effective?

Let's turn now to a very brief summary of what research tells us about civic education programs and practices that foster the knowledge, skills, and civic dispositions essential for all citizens of a constitutional democracy. In short, "what do we know about what works?"

Research reveals that effective programs share certain common characteristics.[14] Among them are these:

- They deliberately and intentionally focus on student outcomes such as students' propensity to vote, to work on local problems, to join voluntary associations, to follow the news, and to discuss public issues.
- They explicitly advocate civic engagement. They encourage students to personally participate in politics and civil society, including at the local level, although without advocating a particular position or party.
- They provide learning opportunities that offer students the chance to engage in discussions of issues and participate in activities that can help put a "real life" perspective on what is learned in class. These activities can range from collaborative research projects and presentations to mock trials, mock elections, simulated legislative hearings, service-learning projects, and participation in student government.
- They emphasize the ideas and principles that are essential to constitutional democracy such as those found in the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and the Federalist Papers. Effective programs help students understand at a deep level how the ideas and principles in these documents relate to present day problems, opportunities, controversies, rights, and responsibilities.

Research also shows that school environments and culture are critical to whether and to what extent young people gain civic skills and dispositions. The most effective programs occur in schools that:

- Consciously promote civic engagement by *all* students, with special attention to those who might otherwise be disengaged.

- Give students opportunities to contribute their *considered opinions* about the governance of the school—not just through student governments, but in forums that engage the whole student body.
- Help students to understand how their own schools and school systems are run, who makes the policies that affect them, and what issues are being debated by local educational leaders and the community.
- Collaborate with the community and local institutions including colleges and universities to provide civic learning opportunities.
- Provide teachers with access to professional development in civics, foster collaboration and networking, and recognize teachers who are doing good work in this area.
- Infuse a civic mission throughout the curriculum; offer an array of extracurricular activities; and structure the school environment and climate so that students are able to "live what they learn" about civics and democracy.

In addition to contributing to our knowledge of effective practices, recent research emphasizes the importance of the timing of civic education. Developmental psychologists and political scientists have confirmed what many of us long have suspected: education for democratic citizenship is both too little and too late. Respected researchers such as Amy Gutmann, Norman Nie, Richard Niemi, and Judith Torney-Purta all tell us that to be most effective, civic education must begin in primary schools. They also agree that adolescence—and early adolescence in particular—appears to be the prime time for learning civic content and skills and for crystallizing democratic dispositions.

Time constraints prevent us from considering the findings of studies by all those scholars. The work of William Damon and his associates at the Center on Adolescence at Stanford University, however, merits special attention. His conclusions about the importance of civic education for early adolescents accord with those of colleagues in the field throughout the world. Damon's studies have led him "to believe that a person's crucial orientations in life incubate during adolescence. If civic concern is not among them, it may never arise." (Damon, 2002:126). He also contends that evidence derived from a large database spanning many countries and several generations of young people,

confirms adolescence as the optimum time for civic education. Damon buttresses his assertions by saying

> Virtually all the classic theories of human development—of Jean Piaget, Erik Erickson, Jane Loevinger, and Harry Stack Sullivan, among many others, portray adolescence as a period when young people formulate their personal, social, and civic identities. A civic identity is an allegiance to a systematic set of moral and political beliefs, a personal ideology of sorts, to which a young person forges a commitment.... The specific beliefs and commitments, of course, may change over the years, but the initial formulation of them during adolescence always has ranked as a key landmark of human development.[15]

Acquiring essential information, understanding the values and principles democracy, developing civic skills, and forming civic dispositions take time. Those essential components of civic education cannot be accomplished in the one or two hours per week that many schools allot to learning for citizenship. Neither can they be achieved in a single "cram" course at the end of secondary school.

To capitalize on adolescence as a prime time for civic learning, schools and communities need to work together. They must afford young people opportunities to learn firsthand about governance in a democratic society—both in their school and in their community. Sufficient time must be given to both preparation for and reflection on their governance and service learning experiences under the guidance of competent teachers. And, as William Damon would have it,

> Within and beyond the classroom, young people should be given a sense of their own potential roles in the continuing drama of their society's search for a more exemplary democracy. This will require conveying to the young a firm faith in the fundamental mission of democratic governance as well as high expectations for young people's capacities to improve it once they have gained their own understanding and commitment.[16]

How Can We Go About Improving Civic Education?

One of the most promising avenues for improving civic education for all of America's young people is for scholars and practitioners to work together. There are at least three proven ways in which scholars can and should collaborate with practitioners:

- First, they can join forces to produce quality curriculum materials.

- Second, scholars are essential to the professional development of teachers. They should use their expertise to help teachers expand their substantive knowledge to acquaint them with new research and to deepen their understanding of and insights into the subjects they teach.
- Third, scholars can act as public advocates for more and better civic education.

Let's consider briefly each of those ways of acting in concert.

One of the hallmarks of the curricular materials produced by the Center for Civic Education from its earliest days to the present has been the involvement of scholars. As each new project was contemplated, specialists in that particular area were invited to provide concept papers, write chapters which subsequently were rewritten or adapted to the developmental level of various groups of students. Scholars then reviewed those adaptations to insure their accuracy and their merit. Thus student materials produced by the Center for Civic Education, whether intended for use in elementary, middle, or high schools reflect the best scholarship.

Scholars also have played an important part in the production of materials for the professional development of teachers. The role of scholars was of enormous consequence in the creation of the *National Standards for Civics and Government*. One reason that those *Standards* have enjoyed both national and international acclaim and acceptance is because of the criticisms and suggestions of scholars over a period of several years and the course of six successive drafts.

Another effort jointly undertaken by scholars and the Center's staff is *CIVITAS: A Framework for Civic Education*. Forty-four scholars in allied disciplines ranging from political philosophy and constitutional law to economics and international relations, as well as geography, gender issues, and specific aspects of government contributed to that work. *CIVITAS* currently is being used in 40 countries throughout all parts of the world. The Center, as is its policy, grants permission without charge to translate and/or reproduce for educational purposes all or parts of *CIVITAS*. Many countries have availed themselves of this opportunity. *CIVITAS* is widely used in teacher training programs, as well as in continuing education programs for experienced professionals. One example is Lithuania, which not only has translated all of *CIVITAS* but requires prospective teachers

to pass a test on its contents to demonstrate their command of the subject matter of civics and government.

A second area in which scholars can make a significant contribution to the betterment of civic education is through their participation in the professional development of teachers. I know that many of you in this audience have served as lecturers, discussion leaders, judges in the **We the People: The Citizen and the Constitution** competitions, as well as in other capacities. The need for expanding the role of scholars in professional development, however, is great, and it is immediate.

What teachers know or their content mastery is a powerful determinant of how much and how well their students will learn. As serious as the teacher recruitment and retention problems are, thoughtful Americans are even more exercised about the quality of those who are in our classrooms. Today too many students are with uncertified teachers. Nationwide, 30 percent of new public school teachers are hired without full certification. In fact, studies suggest that basic literacy, content knowledge, and skill levels that many states require of teachers are significantly below what they require of students on high school graduation tests.

Concern about the content knowledge of teachers is not misplaced. Many studies have shown that that equality of teaching is *the* most important in-school factor in improving student achievement.

In the interest of time, let me single out just one extensive and definitive study which corroborates and extends that assertion. The study was conducted by the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, a consortium of five prestigious universities (Stanford: Teachers College, Columbia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Washington). Using data from a 50 state policy survey, high stakes test results, and case studies of selected states, the study examined the ways in which teacher qualifications and other school inputs are related to student achievement. Here in brief are some particularly noteworthy findings from that study:

- The effects of well-prepared teachers on student achievement can be stronger than the influences of student background factors such as poverty, language, and minority status.

- Teacher quality characteristics, such as certification status and degree in the field to be taught, are very significantly and positively correlated with student outcomes.... The strongest consistently negative predictors of student achievement... are the proportions of new teachers who are uncertified and the proportions of teachers who hold less than a minor in the field they teach.
- Other school resources, such as pupil teacher ratios, class size, and the proportion of all school staff who are teachers, show very weak and rarely significant relationships to student achievement when they are aggregated to the state level.

If we were to sum up the central thrust of this study and put it in the vernacular, we would say, "Students learn when teachers know their stuff." "Knowing their stuff" not only means that teachers know, love, and keep abreast of their field, it also means that teachers command a repertoire of instructional strategies which engage their students and foster their acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Unfortunately, teacher quality is a particularly acute problem in the social studies. The problem of out-of-field teaching, or teachers being assigned to teach subjects that do not match their training or education, is widespread and serious. It happens in well over half of the secondary schools in the nation in any given year, both rural and urban, affluent and low income.

I am aware, of course, of how much members of this audience have done and are doing to enhance teacher quality. You are to be applauded for your efforts, but the need to enhance teacher quality is urgent and support for the continuing education and professional development of teachers is imperative.

Finally, let's consider some ways in which scholars can act as public advocates for civic education. Scholars have a role to play in their individual capacities when they testify before or lobby boards of education and state and national legislatures. Just last week a political scientist from the University of Wisconsin, Madison appeared before the Senate Education Committee of Colorado. The evidence of the need to strengthen civic education she presented was so persuasive that the Committee voted 6-1 for a bill which would require students to pass a civics course as a condition for high school graduation. What is more, the *Denver Post* published excerpts of the professor's testimony so that it reached an even broader audience and, hopefully, generated additional public support.

Scholars also have a role to play in their capacities as members of professional organizations. One example of successful lobbying comes from the National Council for History Education. In concert with the American Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians, the National Council was successful in obtaining the *Teaching American History* grants program. It requires that recipient school districts implement a high quality professional development program that provides educators with content and teaching strategies to prepare all students to meet state standards in American history. It also promotes sustained and ongoing collaboration among teachers and experts in American history from universities and museums.

Several years ago the American Political Science Association formed a Task Force on Civic Education. That was a good start, but its work needs to be extended and intensified. One area where lobbying is needed is in respect to the National Assessment of Educational Achievement in Civics—or as it is popularly known, in NAEP. After ten years of neglect in the assessment of student achievement in civics and government, American youth were assessed in 1998. The results of that assessment were of great value to the educational community. A follow up in five years was promised, but then deferred so that needed trend data and information about the impact of state and national standards on student learning will not be forthcoming in a timely manner. Instead of honoring that commitment, the Board of Governors of NAEP has substituted additional assessments of reading and mathematics.

National assessments in civics on a regularly scheduled basis are critical to the work of educators. If, as we said at the outset, "educating young people for citizenship" is professed to be the primary goal of the nation's schools, then we need to be informed about how well we are meeting that goal so that we can make the necessary course corrections.

Conclusion

True, the golden age was never this one, but as scholars and practitioners we can and must work together to at least brighten the aura of civic education in our own time, because nothing less than the maintenance and improvement of our constitutional democracy is at stake.

Notes

1. Michael Walzer, *What It Means to Be an American: Essays on the American Experience*. New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1996, p. 81.

2. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourses on the Sciences and Arts," in The First and Second Discourses edited by Roger D. Masters. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964, p. 59.

3. "National Youth Survey" released March 4, 2002 by CIRCLE, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, and the Partnership for Trust In Government at the Council for Excellence in Government.

4. For more extended information see "The Civic Mission of Schools." A Report from CIRCLE and Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003, p. 10 (mimeograph)

5. Center for Information and Research in Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) and the Pew Charitable Trusts. Youth Survey 2002.

6. Michael Delli Carpini is quoted in "Civics Lessons Beyond the Classroom," NPR Programming, January 15, 2003: http://www.npr.org/display_pages/features/feature_905341.html

7. Ibid.

8. John Elster, *The Cement of Society: A Study of Social Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 101.

9. See J. Torney-Purta, R. Lehmann, H. Oswald, and W. Schulz, "Citizenship and Education in Twenty-Eight Countries: Civic Knowledge and Engagement at Age Fourteen." Amsterdam, The Netherlands, International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 2001.

10. Patricia Avery. "Using Research on Civic Education to Improve Courses on the Methods of Teaching School Studies." University of Minnesota, Photocopy, 2002, p.3.

11. Torney-Purta. op.cit., p. 172.

12. G. T. Sewall. *Textbooks and the United Nations: The International System and What American Students Learn About It*. New York: The United Nations Association of the United States of America, 2002.

13. Henry Milner, *Civic Literacy: How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work*. Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2002, pp. 1 and 59.

14. Torney-Purta. op. cit., p. 116.

15. *The Civic Mission of Schools*. A Report from CIRCLE and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003. Mimeograph. pp. 17-18.

16. William M. Damon, "To Not Fade Away: Restoring Civil Identity Among the Young" in *Making Good Citizens: Education and Civil Society*. Diane Ravitch and Joseph P. Viteretti, eds. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002, p.127.

17. Ibid. p. 140.

18. National Council for History Education. "Ideas, Notes and news About History Education." Vol. 15, No. 5, January 2003, pp. 1 and 7.

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